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The First Three Years

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AN HISTORICAL PRESENTATION ON THE CHURCH AND COLONY AND INTERESTING SIDELIGHTS IN THE MATANUSKA VALLEY

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BY
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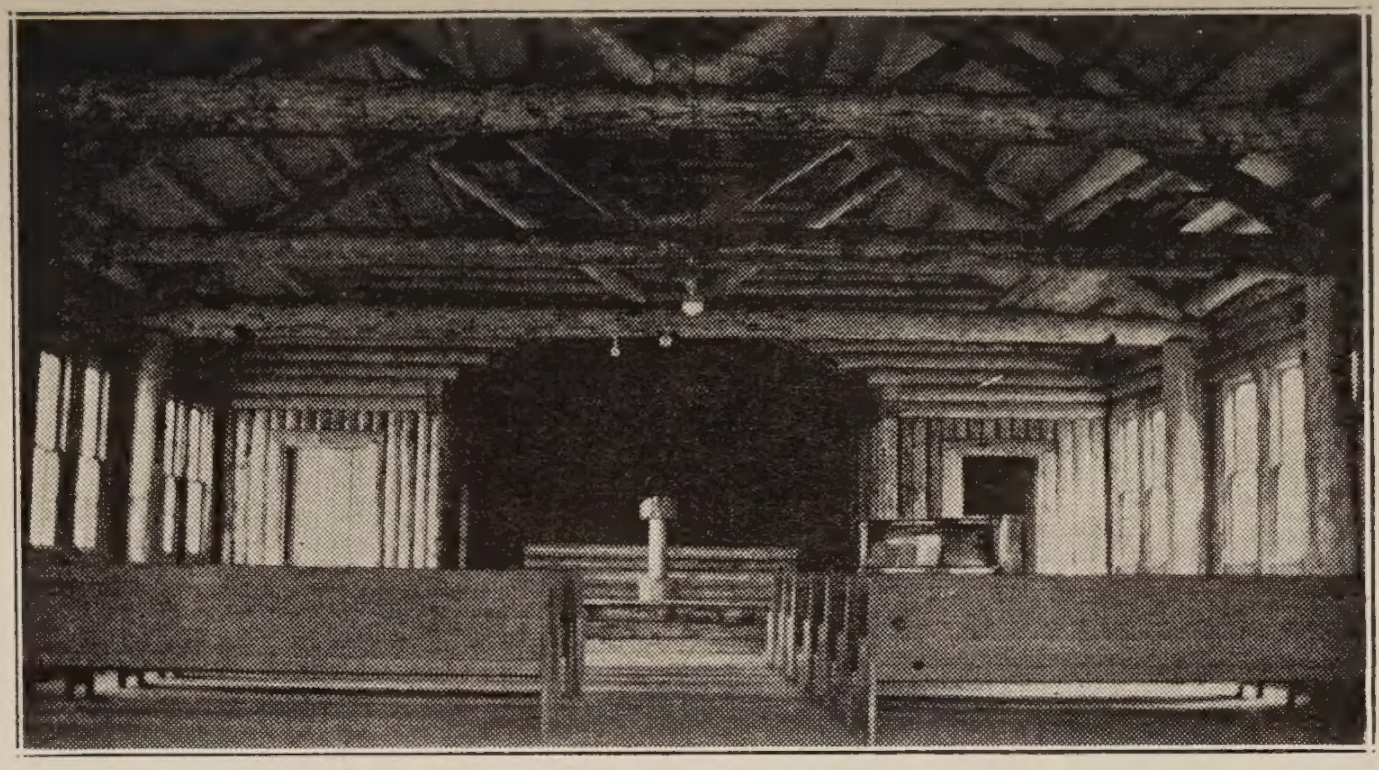
Introduction--

As an introductory statement to the following letter I wish to say that the letter itself is a brief, concise, and accurate account of the beginning and work of the United Protestant Church at Palmer, Alaska.

I wish to acknowledge those to whom I am indebted for information and helpfulness in getting this letter in final shape: Don L. Irwin for information; Irwin Metcalf, teacher, for composition; Mrs. Victor Johnson, J. Q. Adams, and members of The United Church Council for inspiration to publish the said letter; to Vivian Stoddard for typing; and lastly to the capable administrator of our work in the North, Dr. J. M. Somerndike, 156 Fifth Ave., New York City.

REV. B. J. BINGLE.



Virgin timber of the Matanuska Valley was cut and hewn to make this attractive church for the new farmers in Alaska. Each Sunday the residents of the valley come from over 100 square miles to worship here.

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By B. J. BINGLE,
Palmer, Alaska

United Protestant Church

PALMER, ALASKA

To the Members and Friends
of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.:

Since I have been asked many times by our National Missions Board about this Matanuska Valley Parish, saying "we need to have more in our files than just this everyday data on report blanks and office correspondence," I decided to write a little letter about it. If this letter grows a little larger than I first anticipated, I hope you will not mind. Life to you in these moments of reading, I pray, will prove as interesting as it has to us during these last 36 months.

Some people did not and still do not like the idea back of the original set-up of the Colony. They say it is all so inconsistent and those officials in Washington who conceived of such an idea surely have and did have, at the time, an illogical mind.

Reasons For Colony

Well, that may be true or not as you look at it. Before deciding finally against the idea one must remember there were no less than 16 million people at one time walking the streets, looking for work. These people could not find work at that time and there is no need of me telling you that some of the suffering was bitter.

However, all the time that these 16 million were walking the streets there was one class of people in this good old land of ours who was eating quite reg-

ularly their three meals even though their trousers or their shirts might have been made from flour sacks. This group composed the farmers of our U. S. A. Now why not try the oft-repeated suggestion and put some of these idle folks on our city streets back on the farm, that is where they came from anyway, or why not do even more—place those who might be interested in getting a new start in life, on the farm. At least, they could eat. And why not, said the government, happy at the suggestion. So our Territory which had petitioned Washington, since the days before the World War, for a colonial adventure into the Matanuska Valley was chosen as one of the places to try this rehabilitation experiment with the stranded industrialist.

Work in Washington

The adventure was initiated when A. A. Shonbeck, political exponent of this section of Alaska, and Colonel O. F. Ohlson, general manager of the Alaska Railroad, were called to Washington to give data and suggestive ideas. The head of the Matanuska Valley Experiment Station, a man of thoroughness, efficiency, and capability—Don L. Irwin—was also called to Washington and asked to be the Colony's executive.

Those days in Washington were full of intense activity and accomplishment. But right here needs to be added a note regarding the work in Washington which will later give clarity to why some of these first very good ideas were nearly shattered on the rocks of time.

The Political exponent, supported by the two

above mentioned men, was convinced of methods and necessary equipment to be used in opening up this country. His idea was to keep the Project simple, small in the amount of finance expended, but sure as it unfolded year by year, allowing no additions which later might turn the Project into failure.

He suggested that each of the new settlers, or colonists as they are sometimes described, now, be given a loan up to the figure of $3,250.00. This was to provide his transportation to the Valley, build his house, his barn, purchase such livestock and equipment as needed immediately, and allow him enough to see him through the coming unproductive months.

The going would be tough for these "newcomers" but on the basis of past experience he was certain it could be done, that is, if there was the right "sorta stuff" in the pioneer. True, he would have to build his own buildings but that would be his greatest enjoyment, carving a new home out of these primeval forests of the Northland.

Plans Were Expanded

But do you suppose for an instant that our good political exponent, who has his feet on the ground and has made a success of his own business, had his idea fully carried out? He did not!

This country of Alaska was the land of romance in the mind of every reader of fiction in the United States. Robert Service added his bit to the romance when he wrote the "Spell of the Yukon." The various Chambers of Commerce come in for mention as they, in their little envelope leaflets, put the

tingle of adventure in the toes of every "suitcase living American."

When those in authority had time to sleep over this Alaskan innovation it was only natural that with every night's sleep a new idea was added. The next day saw the new idea incorporated in the original plans for the expedition. So great was the change that the political exponent as well as the manager was shortly unable to recognize the first penciled conception of the Colony.

Now, not all of these new ideas were bad. let me add—some were exceptionally good. First. if more money was spent than the original $3,250.00 per family for such things as erecting a beautiful Community Center, the purchase of furnishings for home and the erection of lovely farm buildings, this would make the wheels of industry turn in the United States and many more thousands would be put to work than those sent in as settlers. Not a bad idea, either, when there was so much unemployment! Second, if idle young men were sent in to clear up the land it would assist the new farmer in getting under production; they were tramping our city streets, at least a quarter of a million were homeless and wandering. Third, having a larger construction program than the original. simple conception would give more happiness and satisfaction to the new settler. This would make the project more sure. We shall see later how these suggestions worked out.

Church Work Planned

With the above as preliminary, I will attempt to relate how Mrs. Bingle, myself and family began to fit into the complex scheme of things. It began

with the all-night session of Presbytery at the Van Gilder Hotel in Seward, February 28, 1938. (Never was I in a Presbytery meeting before where the members cleaned and shaved while the meeting was in progress in order that they could take their respective transportation facilities by 7:30 the next morning to their various charges hundreds of miles distant.)

It was at this meeting that we discussed pro and con this Matanuska adventure by the Government and therewith petitioned to initiate full time work. there. Immediately, the question arose of who should be sent in to care for the task. We all felt an Alaskan of some years standing should open up the work and a North Alaskan at that. Rev. Winterberger of Anchorage was asked if he wished the new assignment. He declined due to age. He since has gone to his reward. Rev. Youel of Fairbanks was asked but he "passed."

This brought on a discussion with my beloved friend, Rev. Winterberger, about my putting myself at the disposition of the Board. I must confess my toes began to tingle with those of everyone who was approached in the States by the various case workers, asking them to be the new settlers in the Matanuska Valley. So Presbytery sent in its recommendation which was accepted and I arrived.

The Pastor Arrives

May the 6th, 1935, was the date—high noon—when the long coal train with one passenger coach in which I rode just ahead of the caboose, pulled in be-

fore a small red shed. There was no depot on the spot—not even a station—just this little shelter from the elements. Before this red shed, on the approach and in the vicinity of the same stood, I assume, most every old settler and every wife of the immediate valley, there to welcome the weekly train crew and to see something that represented big industry "outside," instead of a few horses, cows, chickens and a little "bird" they call a mosquito which they see back there in those hundreds of miles of woods.

Rev. Winterberger who was to initiate me to my new field, introduced me to the old settlers—you see he had been in the habit of coming up here and holding services in this primeval forest for the settlers from time to time. My reception was royal. There was our good friend, the little woman with a slightly freckled face, who is the life of every group no matter how dull the occasion—she reached forth her hand. There was the wife of another farmer who had been trying for twenty-five years to get the Valley opened up, and the farmer himself — they both were warm in their welcome. Many and all the others were as cordial, including the civil engineer, Ross L. Sheely, who was later to be the Colony manager.

I should have added that on the train accompanying the preacher was the usual lawyer, and another who was as soon as possible to be the first saloon keeper. Good recommendation for our Church that we let no one representing the "Old Man" get a start on us.

Make Camp

Dinner was quickly provided for us at the M. D. Snodgrass ranch, the settler of 25 years of Alaskan experience, of which I spoke. After that delightful meal and some exchange of thought relative to our new work, I set about to find a place to pitch my 7x9 tent which was to be the manse and home of the pastor for the next six months.

Nature teaches us two things in Alaska, first, get in the open where mosquitoes blow through, and second, get where there is water. A grassy plot, serving as a pig yard in the past, looked good to me. This plot was owned by Jim Felton, and he being the hospitable Alaskan that he is, told me to pitch my tent.

Tent pitched, and my bed made in the corner on the ground, the Yukon stove in place and radio hooked up to the pig pen fence, I was ready to face all that was new of the venture. Two early pioneer settlers came over to my tent that evening when Pete Pringle was telling the world the days happenings via ether waves, and we began a friendship lasting up to date. My radio worked all right on the pig pen fence with but one difficulty, when those "jazz" records were being played from KFQD the fence jigged so high it let the pigs out.

The First Evening

But that first day, or long evening of twilight, was not one of idleness as might be inferred. At 6 p. m. on that same day, a whole trainload of "transient" men, who were collected in California and sent North by steamer, arrived, four hundred in all,

exclusive of officials. Having been in the army myself, it was easy to detect the numerous top sergeants of an earlier day within that group. It was they who lined up these new recruits for an adventure far different than doing "squads right" and started them walking down the dusty road to where they were soon to be initiated to more dust, later mud, thawing ground, thick woods never conquered by man, and the millions of mosquitoes.

Here needs to be added a note—a cause for the later dissention of which you read in the daily press. Never was man expected to do more than was expected of those men in the next twenty-four hours.

The Minnesota Colonists had been sent to Friseo by rail ahead of schedule, and according to their own word, in a train whose accommodations we know as third class today. Men, women, little children, babies, and in some cases cats and dogs, were all in day coaches, shipped hundreds of miles in congestion and discomfort, being "shot" by an army of photographers and a curious public at every instance when they stopped and forced to see lurid and falsified accounts of their person and nature in the press awaiting them at every junction.

Temporary Homes Needed

This group had just arrived at Seward by the way of a government transport whose accommodations were also congested and through a sea that showed them no mercy—they were due to arrive in the Matanuska Valley the next evening. Temporary homes had to be constructed for these sixty-seven families—tents put on tent frames, with plank floors

and boarded sides. Food had to be procured and placed inside as well as a stove, beds, bedding, and mattresses.

This all had to be done by these men, or boys, snatched from freight trains and thumbed automobiles, in California, as well as provide for their own shelter and sanitation, in twenty-four hours of time. (I might add in passing that the line of demarcation in the woods went back farther and farther each day till this was accomplished, also many were the times that we washed in mud holes to get ready for eats or bed.)

The task to be accomplished was too great for these men, or for any group of men regardless of how good they might be. We have done something to our Youth in America in the last few years, particularly the years from 1929 to 1935. As I remember my youthful days in the army, I can recall how our company in our particular barracks was put under arrest at various times for singing too much after the hour for "lights out."

Workers Were Sullen

This group which came in here to do the work listed was no older, but the disheartening thing one could notice, they would not even whistle. Sullen, dejected, defeated, cowed down, driven about, they only moved when ordered to do so, and perhaps that was wise.

I saw for the first time what a depression could actually do to humanity. Surely, I thought, with all that needs to be accomplished in the next twenty-four hours they will be all set to "snap into it" when they get off the train. Then came the first sense of

shock—some took bedding to particular spots, some lined up to make quarters for themselves, some rightfully began to care for the sanitation problem, a small group did report to build Colonists' tents but a long row did line up for a period of time before a baggage car for their ration of "Bull Durham." I, with others, stood in stark amazement!

Men Are Hired

In the meantime, however, another person who arrived on the same train, not connected with the same contingent mentioned, but who apparently had equal authority to do the same thing, at the same time, at the same place, from another branch of the Federal Government, was not idle.

He saw that the getting of sixty-seven temporary homes ready in twenty-four hours was impossible with those sent in to do the work. He quickly employed every available man in the Valley, borrowed some from the road construction crew and set out to construct those homes.

Not a minute of that night, and darkness was never altogether present, was there in which you could not hear hammers pounding and saws whining. In spite of its seriousness and later tragedy, it was a relief to learn the next day that the Minnesota Colonists were to be detained at Seward five days due to measles having broken out on ship.

Prepare For Colonists

The next four days all were full of intense activity. The first day I accompanied the civil engineer collecting land options from the Old Settlers. Not only did I act as witness but on that trip I was

introduced to my first Matanuska Valley mud. I do not know where the bottom of that Fishhook Inn road went as we could never find it, and only could we get out by putting brush under the wheels and hitching an old mule on the back end, hauling the car out the same direction it came.

Nights we would spend in the Road Commission office which was a box car, looking over blue prints for the new town, learning new plans or chatting with New York newsmen in their quarters, then, later, a number rushing to my little 7x9 tent to pick off the pig pen fence the days world happenings.

Our first church service in the Valley was held at Matanuska, a town 7 miles south of the proposed townsite of Palmer, Tuesday eve, May 7th. A fine response was given by the folk of that village.

Minnesotans Arrive

The Minnesota Colonists arrived the evening of May 10th and again the folks of the Valley were down to the Railroad tracks that run to the coal field, this time to welcome and look over the newcomers for their community. Many were eager to see them, they had prayed for that day to arrive for some years back. Others were glad for their coming but were skeptical due to such an extensive program being laid out. Still others just naturally did not like the idea. They belong to the class that even if a thing is good they do not like it.

I will never forget that scene as those new people alighted from the train. Here they were to build a new home, in a place and under conditions so radically different than any were used to—stranded in-

dustrialists attempting to get a new start in life. A few families were middle-aged with older children, but for the most part they were young people, having small children, a few having many children.

Too Big For 40 Acres

I will never forget one man—tall, lank, slightly stooped, as I watched him alight from the train and carry two suitcases over to his assigned tent. There was something about that face and carriage that looked familiar. I thought to myself, "You do not belong on an Alaskan farm of forty acres, you belong astride a 'two-bit' cayuse somewhere in the Rockies. There, no fence will hold you in."

Later that evening, when calling from tent to tent, I noticed his gun. I asked him where he used that big calibered rifle. He said, "In the Middle Fork country." "Middle Fork of what?" was my next question. "Of the Salmon in Idaho," was his reply. "What year, may I ask?" "1925" was the response, "October to be exact."

My mind went immediately back to a 175-mile trip north of our home in the foothills of the Sawtooth range of the same state, then down Rapids River 16 miles by saddle horse, then down the Middle Fork 8 miles to Indian Creek, then up Indian Creek 4 miles to where we took a nameless creek further into the mountains, a place where rarely a white man had been for many years prior to that summer and the only trails were of deer, sheep and mountain lion—it was there that I remembered having seen this new Colonist.

Later, I found my first guess was correct, no

forty acres in Alaska could ever hold that man, as efficient a carpenter and cabinet maker as he was, he left at the end of the first summer, and today I can imagine him astride that "two-bit" cuyuse going on some other unknown trail, up some other unfamiliar mountain recess, where? I guess the sponsors of the adventure here or anyone remaining knows not that answer.

The rest of the families that came to us from Minnesota are about the same as we find in any group that has the desire to migrate, some exceptionally good—the salt of the earth, some not quite so much so—too dependent on others, and others not even interested after having the romance turn into reality, preferring their former occupation in spite of its severe handicaps during the time of depression. But all in all they were a very fine people, comparative figures show them to be about 25 per cent above the average in migratory bodies as to sticking qualities.

The First Sunday

Our first church service at Palmer was held on Mother's Day, May 12. As there were no buildings here in this intersection between the woods, except a couple old ranch houses and barns, and they were small, we used the Government architect's tent. It was arranged to hold about forty people and all that number came out.

What appealed to me was the type of songs the new and old settlers wished to sing—songs we used to sing back there in that old country church in Ohio many years before, songs that give you good religion—they knew them and sang them.

It being Mother's Day the theme was touching as those Mothers had left their own dear mothers a few thousand miles behind and many were never to see them again. Our prayer was that we would be true to them and come up to their expectation of us.

That evening an informal reception was planned for the new settlers, to be held in the same tent. Welcome was given by the new executives and the old settlers. No less than 100 were packed into that 16x20 tent, many stood on the outside. When the audience was finally seated we found it too dangerous to stand and sing, seats and floor might break by continued up and downs. The St. Louis County string quartette was present and they assisted greatly with the music.

While one song our musicians played could not be accused of being "churchy" yet it did give evidence of the romanticism that is so necessary in the heart of the pioneer. They played and sang, "Home on The Range."

Building of First Church

Events were happening thick and fast in the new settlement. It was evident that a temporary meeting place would have to be had for mass meetings, for library purposes, for social gatherings and for church. Being the only one seemingly at large at the time, through a suggestion of my engineering friend to the manager, I was asked to head such a building program.

Shortly I was provided seven men, two hammers, and a crosscut saw and told to go to work. The men went into the woods and cut poles for studding and

logs for sills. With these poles and logs, and odds and ends of shiplap which we scavengered from the constructed tents we were enabled to put up our building. But with no window lights in camp we had to use screen so our building was opened only on the south side, and I must confess it resembled more of a chicken coop than a community hall.

Anyway, completed we formally dedicated it to the service of the Valley on the night of Memorial Day, May 30th. More people by far were on the outside at that occasion but since they could look through the screen those on the outside were a little better off, more chance to swat mosquitoes. The building built and occupied church work dropped down to what church work is any place, only we could never tell whether folks would get in or out due to uncertain transportation. .

More Colonists Arrive

Just before the building was completed Wisconsin and Michigan families arrived. They came by the way of Seattle and as Seattle wishes to do things bigger and better she pushed off on those new farmers all the stray dogs out of her dog pounds. It was interesting to see them arrive.

But before they finally put into the woods where the seven newly constructed tent towns were, old Mother Nature had played her old Alaskan game. Not only was frost at that time leaving the ground but the clouds had poured down water steadily for nearly 60 hours. What those roads were like no one could tell unless he had seen them personally. Newly arrived trucks and tractors were hooked together and

materials for building each of the seven respective villages had to be "mudded" through to their destination. After arrival the materials had to be put together in that rain, which was next to snow, and those men, particularly the farmers' division, had clothes for the occasion suitable for California or central United States, certainly not Alaska.

We must give credit to the number who did remain on the job in spite of the terrible condition, providing shelter for incoming women and children. Some were rebellious and went for their own shelter, ascribing to where the Michigan and Wisconsin women could go (incidentally those women have not gone there yet) but the number that rebelled were few. When the train did arrive bringing in those folks the elements had so played their part that a great portion of the families had to remain on the train all night, except what families the Minnesota colonists took into their tents.

Some thought the incident was terrible, newspaper men thought it was a deficiency by the construction division. But personally, having seen an Alaskan Spring in action for seven previous years, I blame most of it right back on Mother Nature. Anyway, I felt that it was not only a good way for Wisconsin and Michigan to get acquainted with Minnesota but this condition was just the beginning of hardship in Alaska if they were to be real pioneers and if they could not take it without complaint, they did not belong here at all. I want to add—most of them proved their worth. With the help of Miss Forrest of Juneau, the men of the construction division and the Colony staff made all concerned quite comfortable.

Now the Church work had taken on new developments. Father Sulzman of the Catholic Church came in from Seward to be the priest in charge of the new Catholic families and a Rev. Aasen of Minnesota and Reverend Frieling of Anchorage were present to care for the Lutheran families. The Reverend Aasen was advance field representative and remained only for a short time. The time of the Community Hall was allotted to each of us respectively during the forenoon hours. In the evening we attempted to hold services in the Community Hall or about a huge bonfire in the clearing just beyond the door. It seemed the most interesting times we had that first summer were those in or outdoor Sunday evening meetings. Every creed and religion was represented and after dismissal, singing and playing would continue through the long hours of twilight. Coffee and cake in some tent about 11 p. m. would always add warmth and happiness to the occasion.

The meetings inside the Community Hall were perhaps not so full of enthusiasm but they were not without their interesting points. Here, for example, was one night when the mosquitoes drowned us out in our singing. One could scarcely see the pages of his song book to know whether the old time Religion was good enough for Daniel or Daniel was good enough for the old time Religion, just too many mosquitoes. As I battled them on my neck, hands, ankles, my sympathy went to new heights for my organist with her silk hosiery, pumping furiously on that little portable, not even her husband coming to her rescue. All went well with the service till some-

one suggested the song, "Shall We Gather At the River." Right then I felt like going on a "sitdown strike." I did not even want to consider gathering at any river if there were to be any more mosquitoes there than here, you know how rivers and mosquitoes mix.

A Muddy Commencement

And I will never forget another occasion when I was to give the invocation at the graduation services in a little village down the Valley. It was during the time of mud of which I spoke. I was there personally in time—8 p. m.—but there were no graduates. Word came that they were in a ditch but had been pulled out and would arrive shortly. But "shortly" did not arrive. Thirty, forty, fifty minutes they waited—no graduates. I was sent out as one with a fleet of "pickups" to bring them in if we could find them. Well, we never found them, they beat us in. About six miles out, the bottom seemed to disappear from the road all at once and cars were in the ditch, crossways of the road, others sunk to the axle and still going down and I only was left where I could put on chains.

So I, in my light grey broadcloth—all set for the invocation—had to crawl under my car and start operations. After talking to those chains for some time and making sure there was no spot on me that was not getting muddy, only allowing places for mosquitoes to work at their leisure, I accomplished the task of getting those chains on—then to learn that the graduates had made town by themselves. Needless to say I arrived in time for the benediction and I never was certain whether the Lord could

recognize me or not as I was so covered with terra firma.

Our First Newspaper

Other services which our church performed for the Colony in those early days were many and varied. One in particular was the giving to the people a daily newspaper. These folks had come from the States and knew what was going on in the world through the daily press and by means of the radio. Happiness and contentment in their new home could be more assured if that same supply of daily news would be forthcoming. In fact, there would be but little difference from their former homes if that service could be rendered. Hence that old radio which was originally hooked up to Jim Felton's fence was brought into play, and the Palmer Daily was the result being typed out on carbon paper and giving national, world, and local news. It did fill a big need and continued till a sufficient number of families had radios of their own.

Trouble Develops

But one must never be content to believe that the settlement in the Valley was all full of romance and gayety. Just as other pioneering adventures it had weak, bad, and conflicting parts—and still has, look-darker at times than others. People of our world have been pushed and shoved for some time and with years and months of this in the background for this people, coupled with a fighting spirit—which is always an essential in the life of the pioneer—actual fighting did break out. Hot and fierce were some of

the battles. Insurrection on two occasions all but burst forth.

Discontent was largely created when it became apparent that the construction division was insufficient to do the building that was necessary in such a short time. Perhaps they attempted too much, taking it from the new farmers (they wanted to do it themselves). Again, it makes no difference how good a man is—you pay him a wage that is entirely beneath his self-respect, requiring him to work long hours in mud, or heavy dust, or in thick woods and underbrush with its profundity of mosquitoes, and you get just what you pay for. It was never fair to ask those young men to do that unusual amount of construction work for such little pay.

With the coming of additional representatives of the Federal Government on the scene, ways of improvement were quickly noted, and a new zeal and enthusiasm was put into the work, but because of the struggle, many worthwhile colonists did leave and go back; and too, many others lost their original pioneering spirit, it seemed to have taken from them their individual initiative.

In studying the situation carefully I cannot place the blame on any local official, even though made to suffer for the same. Two ever-present Alaskan obstructions must take the full blame—time and distance from our parent government. Communication and transportation take just so much time and unless such is cared for early in each year the summers are soon gone and the falling snow is upon us. In other words the early suggestion of keeping the project simple, for that reason as much as for

any other, would have hastened the development considerably, but who of us do not make mistakes?

Death claimed one, two, three little children and when the pastor read a well meaning scripture passage at the funeral of the first little boy, "There shall be no more death," he had the words flung back into his face on two separate occasions.

Failing to get the Colonists into their permanent homes, failing to get an appreciable amount of land cleared for each family in ample time, failure in getting land for some of the Colonists to settle on due to time and distance again—perhaps Territorial this time, weakness on the part of some of the Colonists to care for the Community garden and to keep their cows out of it if someone else did the work, measles, chicken pox with after effects everywhere, including three deaths, and now another dread disease—scarlet fever—with only one doctor and one nurse, insufficient colonial staff for such an extensive program, and a refusal to fully co-operate by the construction division sent in from California, and the continual presence of one or two colonists getting a group about them, magnifying troubles or stirring up one if the day did not have it provided, caused almost the near riot in one instance and a breakup of the Colony in another.

But if the former salesman of pins and notions—the head of the California contingent, with the rank of a Kentucky Colonel did mix things up we must give credit to the manufacturer of women's under garments and his assignee—a real Colonel—for getting it straight and going again even though imperfectly done.

The coming of an additional doctor into the Valley who immediately found a big place in the hearts and lives of all, was not accidental. Some months prior, God having put the thought and purpose into the heart of this young Moravian, then in charge of the church hospital at Philadelphia, to come to Anchorage, Alaska, and wait—perhaps they would need him some day in the Valley. He obeyed that Divine urge and awaited his time.

The time came and the doctor was needed right now. Three deaths of children had occurred and no mother or father was longer content to see his little ones placed beneath the sod without adequate medical facilities. The work here was too much for the one doctor present no matter how good he might be. Scarlet fever now added to the terror. Within 24 hours after a conference back of the manager's tent, the day of the last funeral, the new Doctor was on the ground. But so quick was the action and so surprising was the need that in the shake-up we lost our Community Hall which contained the library, recreation hall, community center and church, all in one. It was turned into a hospital and within two hours after having cleared out, scarlet fever patients arrived.

With a rigid quarantine on and a necessity for sea foods to be procured, in other words "Humpback Salmon," this disciple of the Lord did just what Peter, James and John did, he went fishing. Having lived in Alaska seven years and having seen the salmon flip their tails at him as they went up

stream certain of the management thought the pastor qualified to head up the fishing.

Well, qualified or not, we made up our crews and went after the fish. Our methods might not have been polished but we brought home the fish and you should have seen the good time we had doing it. For some time the pastor used his little Model A runabout and the speed made on that 30 miles of twisty road won for him the title of "Matanuska Valley Dashhound." That has bad implications as some of you know, having ridden with me yourself. But those evenings about the campfire to keep warm or incidentally sleep—or while drying our clothes, swap yarns with men who have circumscribed the globe, out there under the twilight sky surrounded by forests and more forest and fish, those evenings will never be forgotten.

Manse Is Built

But still the pastor was living in the 7x9 tent and his family which came in from Cordova the last of May was living in a 10x12 tent in the same field. This was August and snow would soon begin to fall. Some kind of house must be constructed at once. The quarantine being lifted, a general meeting of the congregation was called on August 29. We discussed and decided to form a temporary organization under the supervision of the Board of National Missions—Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., on the federated church plan, as there were 13 different denominations represented, and to erect a manse with the five hundred dollars allowed by the Board of National Missions, asking for volunteer labor to do the same.

The manse was completed sufficiently on the outside to move into November 1 at which time the mercury dropped to eight below zero. The inside work had to be completed yet and you could have listened till the late hours of the night and heard our hammers and saws working to complete that home. Mrs. Bingle, Jimmy, aged 5, and Vella, aged 9, were each doing their respective parts.

And this home, too, was not to go without much use. Farmers' wives who walked in many miles would stop here for rest and coffee, throwing off their packs for the time being. Many would come for overnight, our bedroll and davenport were always ready. When the wind would blow so fiercely that "two by fours" like to come sailing through the air, washtubs, coal buckets, stovepipes and "what have you" rolled past our door, coming from somewhere and going places fast, some of our friends, still in tents, used this place as a haven of refuge. Wind does blow here at Palmer, it can whip up a gale to 60 miles and have the pleasant temperature of 10 below. One night I went to see how a lady who was caring for a sick daughter was faring in the wind. Here I found her at 1:30 a. m. trying to hold her stovepipe in the stove and out the tent hole by means of a rope. I looked over the situation when asked what to do and finally answered if she wanted to be sure it stayed there she should just sit there and hold it. She did.

The American Legion used the manse as a meeting place regularly. Other groups held their meetings here. Mrs. Bingle kept the library also. We held regular Sunday School and morning worship serv-

ices here averaging from 40 to 80 according to conditions of weather and transportation, and I want to add that those hours of worship here were happy ones. Worship continued on in the manse till the last Sunday before Easter, 1936, when for want of more room we began services in the Community gymnasium.

On the Sunday of November 24, 1935, our congregation held a formal meeting, adopted a constitution and formulated by-laws for our new church. The name—Protestant Community Church which was later changed to United Protestant Church—was selected and a council of seven members was chosen as the administrative head. Dr. C. Earl Albrecht, the young Moravian mentioned above, was chosen to be presiding officer of the council. Without hesitation this council went ahead like veterans and much of the success of our church can be attributed to the efforts of this fine group of men and women.

In the Spring of 1936, due to the success of our efforts so far, I was authorized to ask the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A.—with which body we affiliated at our first Congregational meeting, to give us a grant of money with which to erect the new church. This was to be presented to the Administrative Director of our work, Dr. J. M. Somerndike, of New York City, while east to attend the General Assembly. On May 9, in New York, a proposition was made to give us $1,500 if we raised a like amount in funds, material and labor. M. D. Snodgrass, the Valley resident of 25 years, had previously given us two lots in the

Snodgrass addition of the Palmer townsite on which to erect our church and manse.

New Church Is Built

On returning to Palmer, July 3, I learned that our work had further grown to such proportions that now the Government was willing to grant us land in the Community Center on which to construct the proposed new building. It was given under condition that we go to work at once and that is just what we did. First we cut down a few hundred trees in the vicinity of what we call the Butte. The logs were brought to the sawmill and at night with volunteer labor we faced those logs on two sides and brought them in to the building site where they were peeled and left to dry. Even the ladies assisted in the latter. Those were glorious days for us and I never will forget the day I saw our first log go through the mill, to become part and parcel of the temple to our God in the far North.

With the logs peeled, our land cleared in part at least, preparation was made for the basement and foundation. The basement was dug mostly by the young men of our congregation at night, as well as the gravel being hauled for the cement work. You can imagine how fitting it was for the lady folk to contribute sandwiches and coffee to complete the evening. But we soon found we did not have enough trees so to the woods we went again. This time it was not so easy. Mud and more autumn mud, just like we mentioned above, only more so, was present. Only with the help of the Lord and our Seventh Day Adventist friend, the log skinner, did we get the logs out for the church of a 1,000 trees in ample time.

United Protestant Church at Palmer, Alaska—a $10,000 structure built and finished by volunteer workers in the Matanuska colonization project, with the aid of $1,500 given by the National Board of Missions.

The cornerstone was laid, September 30, 1936, at the time of evening campfire. Don L. Irwin, first colony manager and chairman of our Building Committee, took the leading part. It was a momentous and happy occasion for each of us. We were happy to have such a one as our Building Chairman and former manager of our Colony as one of our number. It spoke of the manhood of our Community.

Victor Johnson, new farmer from Wisconsin, was selected to head the building adventure as chief carpenter, and his ability proved exceptional. Directly to work the farmers of the Valley went, sacrificing their own things at home that the church could be built. Men could be seen dotting the surface of the building everywhere for the space of three months. When the roof went on in the rain and later cold snow there were almost too many on the building at one time to get effective work accomplished. And what an enjoyment they all received from the same.

The hot lunches at noon, provided by the ladies of the congregation under the leadership of the Ladies' Aid, President Mrs. Carl Erickson, were more like picnics or fellowship suppers for the men. Then came the time for completion, including a great amount of inside work. By this time, the men had to go to work at their own homes but the ladies of the church came and took their places. The chinking was done by them, the oiling of the logs and a dozen other items were looked after by our beloved women, and their equal you would have difficulty to find anywhere.

Now we have a building worth no less than $10,000.00 and all of the finances have been cared

for but a small amount of $200.00 At least one-half of this Valley can look with pride at our structure and say, "that is my church, I helped build it with my own hands."

Conclusion

At present the work of our congregation is going along in a very encouraging manner. We have suffered reverses, loss of community center folk, scarcity of finance, had difficult transportation problems to solve, and just passed through a mighty severe Winter. Still our numbers continue, our interest increases, and we are in the act of planning for our new and permanent manse which is to be erected just back of our beautiful church. We have also to make our work more permanent, been enrolled in the Yukon Presbytery and been incorporated as a local organization under the laws of the Territory of Alaska. The colony itself is now under the leadership of Leo B. Jacobs, General Manager.

In the past we have overcome crisis after crisis. We are faced with a severe one at present. We wish to add, however, that with such a large venture, in spite of all the handicaps mentioned and the personalities involved, the acts of accomplishment have been tremendous. Both local and Federal Government needs to be given a multitude of thanks for their contributions to both local people and to the Territory in general. We hope and pray that as citizens we will be in some measure, at least, worthy of all that has been done for us. And whatever future action the National Government may take relative to its work and presence here, let it be assured, that their contributions here will not have been in

vain. The Matanuska Valley is here, the climate will remain the same, market and soil will improve with development. This 1935 movement will go down in history as one of the large 20th century pioneering projects.

Thank you, one and all, for your kind patience in reading this lengthy account of the set-up and of our work here,

I remain,
Yours in the Master's Work,
REVEREND B. J. BINGLE, *Pastor.*

(Printed by Anchorage Times, Anchorage Alaska)

The First Three Years

AN HISTORICAL PRESENTATION ON THE CHURCH AND COLONY AND INTERESTING SIDELIGHTS IN THE MATANUSKA VALLEY

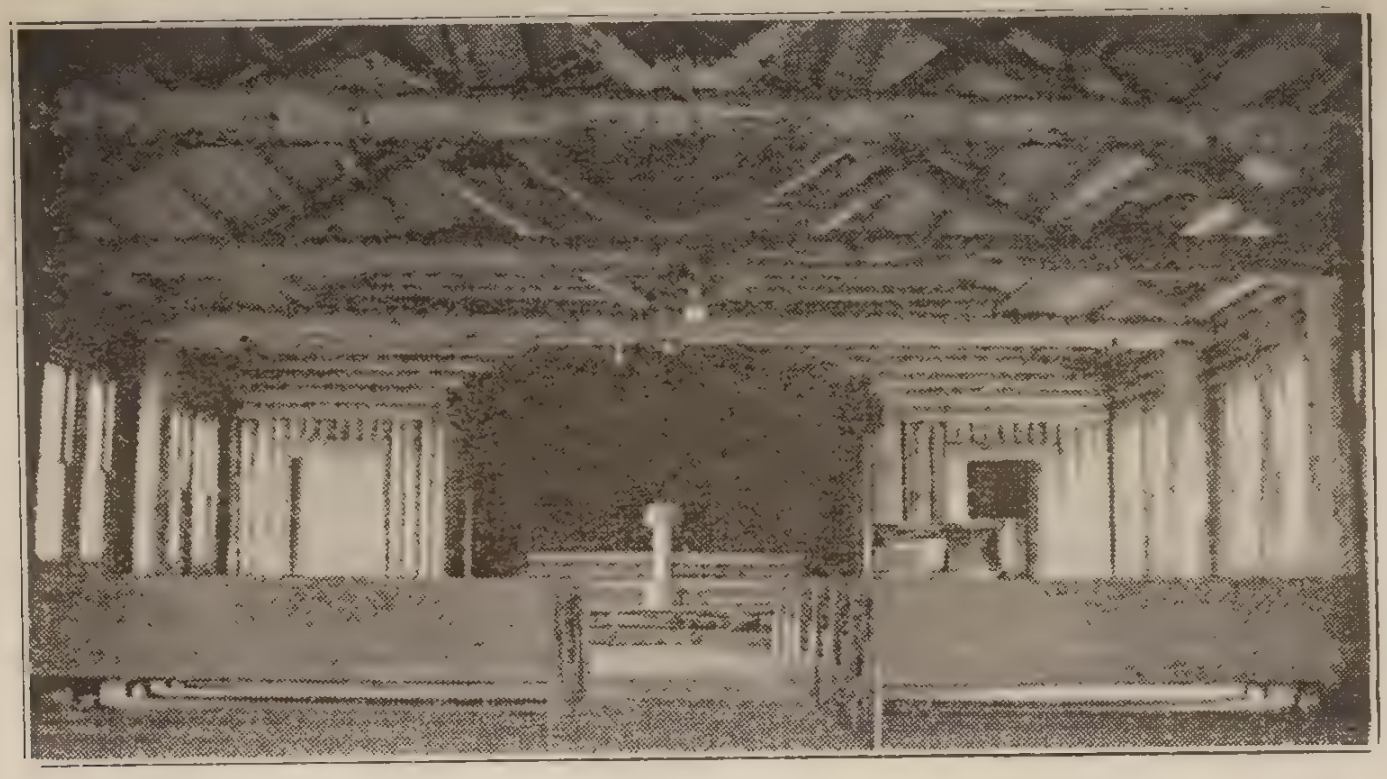
BY
B. J. BINGLE, *Pastor*
UNITED PROTESTANT CHURCH
Palmer, Alaska

Introduction--

As an introductory statement to the following letter I wish to say that the letter itself is a brief, concise, and accurate account of the beginning and work of the United Protestant Church at Palmer, Alaska.

I wish to acknowledge those to whom I am indebted for information and helpfulness in getting this letter in final shape: Don L. Irwin for information; Irwin Metcalf, teacher, for composition; Mrs. Victor Johnson, J. Q. Adams, and members of The United Church Council for inspiration to publish the said letter; to Vivian Stoddard for typing; and lastly to the capable administrator of our work in the North, Dr. J. M. Somerndike, 156 Fifth Ave., New York City.

Rev. B. J. Bingle.



Virgin timber of the Matanuska Valley was cut and hewn to make this attractive church for the new farmers in Alaska. Each Sunday the residents of the valley come from over 100 square miles to worship here.

Copyright, 1938
By B. J. BINGLE,
Palmer, Alaska

United Protestant Church

PALMER, ALASKA

To the Members and Friends
of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.:

Since I have been asked many times by our National Missions Board about this Matanuska Valley Parish, saying "we need to have more in our files than just this everyday data on report blanks and office correspondence," I decided to write a little letter about it. If this letter grows a little larger than I first anticipated, I hope you will not mind. Life to you in these moments of reading, I pray, will prove as interesting as it has to us during these last 36 months.

Some people did not and still do not like the idea back of the original set-up of the Colony. They say it is all so inconsistent and those officials in Washington who conceived of such an idea surely have and did have, at the time, an illogical mind.

Reasons For Colony

Well, that may be true or not as you look at it. Before deciding finally against the idea one must remember there were no less than 16 million people at one time walking the streets, looking for work. These people could not find work at that time and there is no need of me telling you that some of the suffering was bitter.

However, all the time that these 16 million were walking the streets there was one class of people in this good old land of ours who was eating quite reg-

ularly their three meals even though their trousers or their shirts might have been made from flour sacks. This group composed the farmers of our U. S. A. Now why not try the oft-repeated suggestion and put some of these idle folks on our city streets back on the farm, that is where they came from anyway, or why not do even more—place those who might be interested in getting a new start in life, on the farm. At least, they could eat. And why not, said the government, happy at the suggestion. So our Territory which had petitioned Washington, since the days before the World War, for a colonial adventure into the Matanuska Valley was chosen as one of the places to try this rehabilitation experiment with the stranded industrialist.

Work in Washington

The adventure was initiated when A. A. Shonbeck, political exponent of this section of Alaska, and Colonel O. F. Ohlson, general manager of the Alaska Railroad, were called to Washington to give data and suggestive ideas. The head of the Matanuska Valley Experiment Station, a man of thoroughness, efficiency, and capability—Don L. Irwin—was also called to Washington and asked to be the Colony's executive.

Those days in Washington were full of intense activity and accomplishment. But right here needs to be added a note regarding the work in Washington which will later give clarity to why some of these first very good ideas were nearly shattered on the rocks of time.

The Political exponent, supported by the two

above mentioned men, was convinced of methods and necessary equipment to be used in opening up this country. His idea was to keep the Project simple, small in the amount of finance expended, but sure as it unfolded year by year, allowing no additions which later might turn the Project into failure.

He suggested that each of the new settlers, or colonists as they are sometimes described, now, be given a loan up to the figure of $3,250.00. This was to provide his transportation to the Valley, build his house, his barn, purchase such livestock and equipment as needed immediately, and allow him enough to see him through the coming unproductive months.

The going would be tough for these "newcomers" but on the basis of past experience he was certain it could be done, that is, if there was the right "sorta stuff" in the pioneer. True, he would have to build his own buildings but that would be his greatest enjoyment, carving a new home out of these primeval forests of the Northland.

Plans Were Expanded

But do you suppose for an instant that our good political exponent, who has his feet on the ground and has made a success of his own business, had his idea fully carried out? He did not!

This country of Alaska was the land of romance in the mind of every reader of fiction in the United States. Robert Service added his bit to the romance when he wrote the "Spell of the Yukon." The various Chambers of Commerce come in for mention as they, in their little envelope leaflets, put the

tingle of adventure in the toes of every "suitcase living American."

When those in authority had time to sleep over this Alaskan innovation it was only natural that with every night's sleep a new idea was added. The next day saw the new idea incorporated in the original plans for the expedition. So great was the change that the political exponent as well as the manager was shortly unable to recognize the first penciled conception of the Colony.

Now, not all of these new ideas were bad, let me add—some were exceptionally good. First, if more money was spent than the original $3,250.00 per family for such things as erecting a beautiful Community Center, the purchase of furnishings for home and the erection of lovely farm buildings, this would make the wheels of industry turn in the United States and many more thousands would be put to work than those sent in as settlers. Not a bad idea, either, when there was so much unemployment! Second, if idle young men were sent in to clear up the land it would assist the new farmer in getting under production; they were tramping our city streets, at least a quarter of a million were homeless and wandering. Third, having a larger construction program than the original, simple conception would give more happiness and satisfaction to the new settler. This would make the project more sure. We shall see later how these suggestions worked out.

Church Work Planned

With the above as preliminary, I will attempt to relate how Mrs. Bingle, myself and family began to fit into the complex scheme of things. It began

with the all-night session of Presbytery at the Van Gilder Hotel in Seward, February 28, 1938. (Never was I in a Presbytery meeting before where the members cleaned and shaved while the meeting was in progress in order that they could take their respective transportation facilities by 7:30 the next morning to their various charges hundreds of miles distant.)

It was at this meeting that we discussed pro and con this Matanuska adventure by the Government and therewith petitioned to initiate full time work. there. Immediately, the question arose of who should be sent in to care for the task. We all felt an Alaskan of some years standing should open up the work and a North Alaskan at that. Rev. Winterberger of Anchorage was asked if he wished the new assignment. He declined due to age. He since has gone to his reward. Rev. Youel of Fairbanks was asked but he "passed."

This brought on a discussion with my beloved friend, Rev. Winterberger, about my putting myself at the disposition of the Board. I must confess my toes began to tingle with those of everyone who was approached in the States by the various case workers, asking them to be the new settlers in the Matanuska Valley. So Presbytery sent in its recommendation which was accepted and I arrived.

The Pastor Arrives

May the 6th, 1935, was the date—high noon—when the long coal train with one passenger coach in which I rode just ahead of the caboose, pulled in be-

fore a small red shed. There was no depot on the spot—not even a station—just this little shelter from the elements. Before this red shed, on the approach and in the vicinity of the same stood, I assume, most every old settler and every wife of the immediate valley, there to welcome the weekly train crew and to see something that represented big industry "outside," instead of a few horses, cows, chickens and a little "bird" they call a mosquito which they see back there in those hundreds of miles of woods.

Rev. Winterberger who was to initiate me to my new field, introduced me to the old settlers—you see he had been in the habit of coming up here and holding services in this primeval forest for the settlers from time to time. My reception was royal. There was our good friend, the little woman with a slightly freckled face, who is the life of every group no matter how dull the occasion—she reached forth her hand. There was the wife of another farmer who had been trying for twenty-five years to get the Valley opened up, and the farmer himself—they both were warm in their welcome. Many and all the others were as cordial, including the civil engineer, Ross L. Sheely, who was later to be the Colony manager.

I should have added that on the train accompanying the preacher was the usual lawyer, and another who was as soon as possible to be the first saloon keeper. Good recommendation for our Church that we let no one representing the "Old Man" get a start on us.

Make Camp

Dinner was quickly provided for us at the M. D. Snodgrass ranch, the settler of 25 years of Alaskan experience, of which I spoke. After that delightful meal and some exchange of thought relative to our new work, I set about to find a place to pitch my 7x9 tent which was to be the manse and home of the pastor for the next six months.

Nature teaches us two things in Alaska, first, get in the open where mosquitoes blow through, and second, get where there is water. A grassy plot, serving as a pig yard in the past, looked good to me. This plot was owned by Jim Felton, and he being the hospitable Alaskan that he is, told me to pitch my tent.

Tent pitched, and my bed made in the corner on the ground, the Yukon stove in place and radio hooked up to the pig pen fence, I was ready to face all that was new of the venture. Two early pioneer settlers came over to my tent that evening when Pete Pringle was telling the world the days happenings via ether waves, and we began a friendship lasting up to date. My radio worked all right on the pig pen fence with but one difficulty, when those "jazz" records were being played from KFQD the fence jigged so high it let the pigs out.

The First Evening

But that first day, or long evening of twilight, was not one of idleness as might be inferred. At 6 p. m. on that same day, a whole trainload of "transient" men, who were collected in California and sent North by steamer, arrived, four hundred in all,

exclusive of officials. Having been in the army myself, it was easy to detect the numerous top sergeants of an earlier day within that group. It was they who lined up these new recruits for an adventure far different than doing "squads right" and started them walking down the dusty road to where they were soon to be initiated to more dust, later mud, thawing ground, thick woods never conquered by man, and the millions of mosquitoes.

Here needs to be added a note—a cause for the later dissention of which you read in the daily press. Never was man expected to do more than was expected of those men in the next twenty-four hours.

The Minnesota Colonists had been sent to Friseo by rail ahead of schedule, and according to their own word, in a train whose accommodations we know as third class today. Men, women, little children, babies, and in some cases cats and dogs, were all in day coaches, shipped hundreds of miles in congestion and discomfort, being "shot" by an army of photographers and a curious public at every instance when they stopped and forced to see lurid and falsified accounts of their person and nature in the press awaiting them at every junction.

Temporary Homes Needed

This group had just arrived at Seward by the way of a government transport whose accommodations were also congested and through a sea that showed them no mercy—they were due to arrive in the Matanuska Valley the next evening. Temporary homes had to be constructed for these sixty-seven families—tents put on tent frames, with plank floors

and boarded sides. Food had to be procured and placed inside as well as a stove, beds, bedding, and mattresses.

This all had to be done by these men, or boys, snatched from freight trains and thumbed automobiles, in California, as well as provide for their own shelter and sanitation, in twenty-four hours of time. (I might add in passing that the line of demarcation in the woods went back farther and farther each day till this was accomplished, also many were the times that we washed in mud holes to get ready for eats or bed.)

The task to be accomplished was too great for these men, or for any group of men regardless of how good they might be. We have done something to our Youth in America in the last few years, particularly the years from 1929 to 1935. As I remember my youthful days in the army, I can recall how our company in our particular barracks was put under arrest at various times for singing too much after the hour for "lights out."

Workers Were Sullen

This group which came in here to do the work listed was no older, but the disheartening thing one could notice, they would not even whistle. Sullen, dejected, defeated, cowed down, driven about, they only moved when ordered to do so, and perhaps that was wise.

I saw for the first time what a depression could actually do to humanity. Surely, I thought, with all that needs to be accomplished in the next twenty-four hours they will be all set to "snap into it" when they get off the train. Then came the first sense of

shock—some took bedding to particular spots, some lined up to make quarters for themselves, some rightfully began to care for the sanitation problem, a small group did report to build Colonists' tents but a long row did line up for a period of time before a baggage car for their ration of "Bull Durham." I, with others, stood in stark amazement!

Men Are Hired

In the meantime, however, another person who arrived on the same train, not connected with the same contingent mentioned, but who apparently had equal authority to do the same thing, at the same time, at the same place, from another branch of the Federal Government, was not idle.

He saw that the getting of sixty-seven temporary homes ready in twenty-four hours was impossible with those sent in to do the work. He quickly employed every available man in the Valley, borrowed some from the road construction crew and set out to construct those homes.

Not a minute of that night, and darkness was never altogether present, was there in which you could not hear hammers pounding and saws whining. In spite of its seriousness and later tragedy, it was a relief to learn the next day that the Minnesota Colonists were to be detained at Seward five days due to measles having broken out on ship.

Prepare For Colonists

The next four days all were full of intense activity. The first day I accompanied the civil engineer collecting land options from the Old Settlers. Not only did I act as witness but on that trip I was

introduced to my first Matanuska Valley mud. I do not know where the bottom of that Fishhook Inn road went as we could never find it, and only could we get out by putting brush under the wheels and hitching an old mule on the back end, hauling the car out the same direction it came.

Nights we would spend in the Road Commission office which was a box car, looking over blue prints for the new town, learning new plans or chatting with New York newsmen in their quarters, then, later, a number rushing to my little 7x9 tent to pick off the pig pen fence the days world happenings.

Our first church service in the Valley was held at Matanuska, a town 7 miles south of the proposed townsite of Palmer, Tuesday eve, May 7th. A fine response was given by the folk of that village.

Minnesotans Arrive

The Minnesota Colonists arrived the evening of May 10th and again the folks of the Valley were down to the Railroad tracks that run to the coal field, this time to welcome and look over the newcomers for their community. Many were eager to see them, they had prayed for that day to arrive for some years back. Others were glad for their coming but were skeptical due to such an extensive program being laid out. Still others just naturally did not like the idea. They belong to the class that even if a thing is good they do not like it.

I will never forget that scene as those new people alighted from the train. Here they were to build a new home, in a place and under conditions so radically different than any were used to—stranded in-

dustrialists attempting to get a new start in life. A few families were middle-aged with older children, but for the most part they were young people, having small children, a few having many children.

Too Big For 40 Acres

I will never forget one man—tall, lank, slightly stooped, as I watched him alight from the train and carry two suitcases over to his assigned tent. There was something about that face and carriage that looked familiar. I thought to myself, "You do not belong on an Alaskan farm of forty acres, you belong astride a 'two-bit' cuyuse somewhere in the Rockies. There, no fence will hold you in."

Later that evening, when calling from tent to tent, I noticed his gun. I asked him where he used that big calibered rifle. He said, "In the Middle Fork country." "Middle Fork of what?" was my next question. "Of the Salmon in Idaho," was his reply. "What year, may I ask?" "1925" was the response, "October to be exact."

My mind went immediately back to a 175-mile trip north of our home in the foothills of the Sawtooth range of the same state, then down Rapids River 16 miles by saddle horse, then down the Middle Fork 8 miles to Indian Creek, then up Indian Creek 4 miles to where we took a nameless creek further into the mountains, a place where rarely a white man had been for many years prior to that summer and the only trails were of deer, sheep and mountain lion—it was there that I remembered having seen this new Colonist.

Later, I found my first guess was correct, no

forty acres in Alaska could ever hold that man, as efficient a carpenter and cabinet maker as he was, he left at the end of the first summer, and today I can imagine him astride that "two-bit" cuyuse going on some other unknown trail, up some other unfamiliar mountain recess, where? I guess the sponsors of the adventure here or anyone remaining knows not that answer.

The rest of the families that came to us from Minnesota are about the same as we find in any group that has the desire to migrate, some exceptionally good—the salt of the earth, some not quite so much so—too dependent on others, and others not even interested after having the romance turn into reality, preferring their former occupation in spite of its severe handicaps during the time of depression. But all in all they were a very fine people, comparative figures show them to be about 25 per cent above the average in migratory bodies as to sticking qualities.

The First Sunday

Our first church service at Palmer was held on Mother's Day, May 12. As there were no buildings here in this intersection between the woods, except a couple old ranch houses and barns, and they were small, we used the Government architect's tent. It was arranged to hold about forty people and all that number came out.

What appealed to me was the type of songs the new and old settlers wished to sing—songs we used to sing back there in that old country church in Ohio many years before, songs that give you good religion—they knew them and sang them.

It being Mother's Day the theme was touching as those Mothers had left their own dear mothers a few thousand miles behind and many were never to see them again. Our prayer was that we would be true to them and come up to their expectation of us.

That evening an informal reception was planned for the new settlers, to be held in the same tent. Welcome was given by the new executives and the old settlers. No less than 100 were packed into that 16x20 tent, many stood on the outside. When the audience was finally seated we found it too dangerous to stand and sing, seats and floor might break by continued up and downs. The St. Louis County string quartette was present and they assisted greatly with the music.

While one song our musicians played could not be accused of being "churchy" yet it did give evidence of the romanticism that is so necessary in the heart of the pioneer. They played and sang, "Home on The Range."

Building of First Church

Events were happening thick and fast in the new settlement. It was evident that a temporary meeting place would have to be had for mass meetings, for library purposes, for social gatherings and for church. Being the only one seemingly at large at the time, through a suggestion of my engineering friend to the manager, I was asked to head such a building program.

Shortly I was provided seven men, two hammers, and a crosscut saw and told to go to work. The men went into the woods and cut poles for studding and

logs for sills. With these poles and logs, and odds and ends of shiplap which we scavengered from the constructed tents we were enabled to put up our building. But with no window lights in camp we had to use screen so our building was opened only on the south side, and I must confess it resembled more of a chicken coop than a community hall.

Anyway, completed we formally dedicated it to the service of the Valley on the night of Memorial Day, May 30th. More people by far were on the outside at that occasion but since they could look through the screen those on the outside were a little better off, more chance to swat mosquitoes. The building built and occupied church work dropped down to what church work is any place, only we could never tell whether folks would get in or out due to uncertain transportation.

More Colonists Arrive

Just before the building was completed Wisconsin and Michigan families arrived. They came by the way of Seattle and as Seattle wishes to do things bigger and better she pushed off on those new farmers all the stray dogs out of her dog pounds. It was interesting to see them arrive.

But before they finally put into the woods where the seven newly constructed tent towns were, old Mother Nature had played her old Alaskan game. Not only was frost at that time leaving the ground but the clouds had poured down water steadily for nearly 60 hours. What those roads were like no one could tell unless he had seen them personally. Newly arrived trucks and tractors were hooked together and

materials for building each of the seven respective villages had to be "mudded" through to their destination. After arrival the materials had to be put together in that rain, which was next to snow, and those men, particularly the farmers' division, had clothes for the occasion suitable for California or central United States, certainly not Alaska.

We must give credit to the number who did remain on the job in spite of the terrible condition, providing shelter for incoming women and children. Some were rebellious and went for their own shelter, ascribing to where the Michigan and Wisconsin women could go (incidentally those women have not gone there yet) but the number that rebelled were few. When the train did arrive bringing in those folks the elements had so played their part that a great portion of the families had to remain on the train all night, except what families the Minnesota colonists took into their tents.

Some thought the incident was terrible, newspaper men thought it was a deficieney by the construction division. But personally, having seen an Alaskan Spring in action for seven previous years, I blame most of it right back on Mother Nature. Anyway, I felt that it was not only a good way for Wisconsin and Michigan to get acquainted with Minnesota but this condition was just the beginning of hardship in Alaska if they were to be real pioneers and if they could not take it without complaint, they did not belong here at all. I want to add—most of them proved their worth. With the help of Miss Forrest of Juneau, the men of the construction division and the Colony staff made all concerned quite comfortable.

Now the Church work had taken on new developments. Father Sulzman of the Catholic Church came in from Seward to be the priest in charge of the new Catholic families and a Rev. Aasen of Minnesota and Reverend Frieling of Anchorage were present to care for the Lutheran families. The Reverend Aasen was advance field representative and remained only for a short time. The time of the Community Hall was allotted to each of us respectively during the forenoon hours. In the evening we attempted to hold services in the Community Hall or about a huge bonfire in the clearing just beyond the door. It seemed the most interesting times we had that first summer were those in or outdoor Sunday evening meetings. Every creed and religion was represented and after dismissal, singing and playing would continue through the long hours of twilight. Coffee and cake in some tent about 11 p. m. would always add warmth and happiness to the occasion.

The meetings inside the Community Hall were perhaps not so full of enthusiasm but they were not without their interesting points. Here, for example, was one night when the mosquitoes drowned us out in our singing. One could scarcely see the pages of his song book to know whether the old time Religion was good enough for Daniel or Daniel was good enough for the old time Religion, just too many mosquitoes. As I battled them on my neck, hands, ankles, my sympathy went to new heights for my organist with her silk hosiery, pumping furiously on that little portable, not even her husband coming to her rescue. All went well with the service till some-

one suggested the song, "Shall We Gather At the River." Right then I felt like going on a "sitdown strike." I did not even want to consider gathering at any river if there were to be any more mosquitoes there than here, you know how rivers and mosquitoes mix.

A Muddy Commencement

And I will never forget another occasion when I was to give the invocation at the graduation services in a little village down the Valley. It was during the time of mud of which I spoke. I was there personally in time—8 p. m.—but there were no graduates. Word came that they were in a ditch but had been pulled out and would arrive shortly. But "shortly" did not arrive. Thirty, forty, fifty minutes they waited—no graduates. I was sent out as one with a fleet of "pickups" to bring them in if we could find them. Well, we never found them, they beat us in. About six miles out, the bottom seemed to disappear from the road all at once and cars were in the ditch, crossways of the road, others sunk to the axle and still going down and I only was left where I could put on chains.

So I, in my light grey broadcloth—all set for the invocation—had to crawl under my car and start operations. After talking to those chains for some time and making sure there was no spot on me that was not getting muddy, only allowing places for mosquitoes to work at their leisure, I accomplished the task of getting those chains on—then to learn that the graduates had made town by themselves. Needless to say I arrived in time for the benediction and I never was certain whether the Lord could

recognize me or not as I was so covered with terra firma.

Our First Newspaper

Other services which our church performed for the Colony in those early days were many and varied. One in particular was the giving to the people a daily newspaper. These folks had come from the States and knew what was going on in the world through the daily press and by means of the radio. Happiness and contentment in their new home could be more assured if that same supply of daily news would be forthcoming. In fact, there would be but little difference from their former homes if that service could be rendered. Hence that old radio which was originally hooked up to Jim Felton's fence was brought into play, and the Palmer Daily was the result being typed out on carbon paper and giving national, world, and local news. It did fill a big need and continued till a sufficient number of families had radios of their own.

Trouble Develops

But one must never be content to believe that the settlement in the Valley was all full of romance and gayety. Just as other pioneering adventures it had weak, bad, and conflicting parts—and still has, look-darker at times than others. People of our world have been pushed and shoved for some time and with years and months of this in the background for this people, coupled with a fighting spirit—which is always an essential in the life of the pioneer—actual fighting did break out. Hot and fierce were some of

the battles. Insurrection on two occasions all but burst forth.

Discontent was largely created when it became apparent that the construction division was insufficient to do the building that was necessary in such a short time. Perhaps they attempted too much, taking it from the new farmers (they wanted to do it themselves). Again, it makes no difference how good a man is—you pay him a wage that is entirely beneath his self-respect, requiring him to work long hours in mud, or heavy dust, or in thick woods and underbrush with its profundity of mosquitoes, and you get just what you pay for. It was never fair to ask those young men to do that unusual amount of construction work for such little pay.

With the coming of additional representatives of the Federal Government on the scene, ways of improvement were quickly noted, and a new zeal and enthusiasm was put into the work, but because of the struggle, many worthwhile colonists did leave and go back; and too, many others lost their original pioneering spirit, it seemed to have taken from them their individual initiative.

In studying the situation carefully I cannot place the blame on any local official, even though made to suffer for the same. Two ever-present Alaskan obstructions must take the full blame—time and distance from our parent government. Communication and transportation take just so much time and unless such is cared for early in each year the summers are soon gone and the falling snow is upon us. In other words the early suggestion of keeping the project simple, for that reason as much as for

any other, would have hastened the development considerably, but who of us do not make mistakes?

Death claimed one, two, three little children and when the pastor read a well meaning scripture passage at the funeral of the first little boy, "There shall be no more death," he had the words flung back into his face on two separate occasions.

Failing to get the Colonists into their permanent homes, failing to get an appreciable amount of land cleared for each family in ample time, failure in getting land for some of the Colonists to settle on due to time and distance again—perhaps Territorial this time, weakness on the part of some of the Colonists to care for the Community garden and to keep their cows out of it if someone else did the work, measles, chicken pox with after effects everywhere, including three deaths, and now another dread disease—scarlet fever—with only one doctor and one nurse, insufficient colonial staff for such an extensive program, and a refusal to fully co-operate by the construction division sent in from California, and the continual presence of one or two colonists getting a group about them, magnifying troubles or stirring up one if the day did not have it provided, caused almost the near riot in one instance and a breakup of the Colony in another.

But if the former salesman of pins and notions—the head of the California contingent, with the rank of a Kentucky Colonel did mix things up we must give credit to the manufacturer of women's under garments and his assignee—a real Colonel—for getting it straight and going again even though imperfectly done.

New Doctor Arrives

The coming of an additional doctor into the Valley who immediately found a big place in the hearts and lives of all, was not accidental. Some months prior, God having put the thought and purpose into the heart of this young Moravian, then in charge of the church hospital at Philadelphia, to come to Anchorage, Alaska, and wait—perhaps they would need him some day in the Valley. He obeyed that Divine urge and awaited his time.

The time came and the doctor was needed right now. Three deaths of children had occurred and no mother or father was longer content to see his little ones placed beneath the sod without adequate medical facilities. The work here was too much for the one doctor present no matter how good he might be. Scarlet fever now added to the terror. Within 24 hours after a conference back of the manager's tent, the day of the last funeral, the new Doctor was on the ground. But so quick was the action and so surprising was the need that in the shake-up we lost our Community Hall which contained the library, recreation hall, community center and church, all in one. It was turned into a hospital and within two hours after having cleared out, scarlet fever patients arrived.

With a rigid quarantine on and a necessity for sea foods to be procured, in other words "Humpback Salmon," this disciple of the Lord did just what Peter, James and John did, he went fishing. Having lived in Alaska seven years and having seen the salmon flip their tails at him as they went up

stream certain of the management thought the pastor qualified to head up the fishing.

Well, qualified or not, we made up our crews and went after the fish. Our methods might not have been polished but we brought home the fish and you should have seen the good time we had doing it. For some time the pastor used his little Model A runabout and the speed made on that 30 miles of twisty road won for him the title of "Matanuska Valley Dashhound." That has bad implications as some of you know, having ridden with me yourself. But those evenings about the campfire to keep warm or incidentally sleep—or while drying our clothes, swap yarns with men who have circumscribed the globe, out there under the twilight sky surrounded by forests and more forest and fish, those evenings will never be forgotten.

Manse Is Built

But still the pastor was living in the 7x9 tent and his family which came in from Cordova the last of May was living in a 10x12 tent in the same field. This was August and snow would soon begin to fall. Some kind of house must be constructed at once. The quarantine being lifted, a general meeting of the congregation was called on August 29. We discussed and decided to form a temporary organization under the supervision of the Board of National Missions—Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., on the federated church plan, as there were 13 different denominations represented, and to erect a manse with the five hundred dollars allowed by the Board of National Missions, asking for volunteer labor to do the same.

The manse was completed sufficiently on the outside to move into November 1 at which time the mercury dropped to eight below zero. The inside work had to be completed yet and you could have listened till the late hours of the night and heard our hammers and saws working to complete that home. Mrs. Bingle, Jimmy, aged 5, and Vella, aged 9, were each doing their respective parts.

And this home, too, was not to go without much use. Farmers' wives who walked in many miles would stop here for rest and coffee, throwing off their packs for the time being. Many would come for overnight, our bedroll and davenport were always ready. When the wind would blow so fiercely that "two by fours" like to come sailing through the air, washtubs, coal buckets, stovepipes and "what have you" rolled past our door, coming from somewhere and going places fast, some of our friends, still in tents, used this place as a haven of refuge. Wind does blow here at Palmer, it can whip up a gale to 60 miles and have the pleasant temperature of 10 below. One night I went to see how a lady who was caring for a sick daughter was faring in the wind. Here I found her at 1:30 a. m. trying to hold her stovepipe in the stove and out the tent hole by means of a rope. I looked over the situation when asked what to do and finally answered if she wanted to be sure it stayed there she should just sit there and hold it. She did.

The American Legion used the manse as a meeting place regularly. Other groups held their meetings here. Mrs. Bingle kept the library also. We held regular Sunday School and morning worship serv-

ices here averaging from 40 to 80 according to conditions of weather and transportation, and I want to add that those hours of worship here were happy ones. Worship continued on in the manse till the last Sunday before Easter, 1936, when for want of more room we began services in the Community gymnasium.

On the Sunday of November 24, 1935, our congregation held a formal meeting, adopted a constitution and formulated by-laws for our new church. The name—Protestant Community Church which was later changed to United Protestant Church—was selected and a council of seven members was chosen as the administrative head. Dr. C. Earl Albrecht, the young Moravian mentioned above, was chosen to be presiding officer of the council. Without hesitation this council went ahead like veterans and much of the success of our church can be attributed to the efforts of this fine group of men and women.

In the Spring of 1936, due to the success of our efforts so far, I was authorized to ask the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A.—with which body we affiliated at our first Congregational meeting, to give us a grant of money with which to erect the new church. This was to be presented to the Administrative Director of our work, Dr. J. M. Somerndike, of New York City, while east to attend the General Assembly. On May 9, in New York, a proposition was made to give us $1,500 if we raised a like amount in funds, material and labor. M. D. Snodgrass, the Valley resident of 25 years, had previously given us two lots in the

Snodgrass addition of the Palmer townsite on which to erect our church and manse.

New Church Is Built

On returning to Palmer, July 3, I learned that our work had further grown to such proportions that now the Government was willing to grant us land in the Community Center on which to construct the proposed new building. It was given under condition that we go to work at once and that is just what we did. First we cut down a few hundred trees in the vicinity of what we call the Butte. The logs were brought to the sawmill and at night with volunteer labor we faced those logs on two sides and brought them in to the building site where they were peeled and left to dry. Even the ladies assisted in the latter. Those were glorious days for us and I never will forget the day I saw our first log go through the mill, to become part and parcel of the temple to our God in the far North.

With the logs peeled, our land cleared in part at least, preparation was made for the basement and foundation. The basement was dug mostly by the young men of our congregation at night, as well as the gravel being hauled for the cement work. You can imagine how fitting it was for the lady folk to contribute sandwiches and coffee to complete the evening. But we soon found we did not have enough trees so to the woods we went again. This time it was not so easy. Mud and more autumn mud, just like we mentioned above, only more so, was present. Only with the help of the Lord and our Seventh Day Adventist friend, the log skinner, did we get the logs out for the church of a 1,000 trees in ample time.

United Protestant Church at Palmer, Alaska—a $10,000 structure built and finished by vo'unteer workers in the Matanuska colonization project, with the aid of $1,500 given by the National Board of Missions.

The cornerstone was laid, September 30, 1936, at the time of evening campfire. Don L. Irwin, first colony manager and chairman of our Building Committee, took the leading part. It was a momentous and happy occasion for each of us. We were happy to have such a one as our Building Chairman and former manager of our Colony as one of our number. It spoke of the manhood of our Community.

Victor Johnson, new farmer from Wisconsin, was selected to head the building adventure as chief carpenter, and his ability proved exceptional. Directly to work the farmers of the Valley went, sacrificing their own things at home that the church could be built. Men could be seen dotting the surface of the building everywhere for the space of three months. When the roof went on in the rain and later cold snow there were almost too many on the building at one time to get effective work accomplished. And what an enjoyment they all received from the same.

The hot lunches at noon, provided by the ladies of the congregation under the leadership of the Ladies' Aid, President Mrs. Carl Erickson, were more like picnics or fellowship suppers for the men. Then came the time for completion, including a great amount of inside work. By this time, the men had to go to work at their own homes but the ladies of the church came and took their places. The chinking was done by them, the oiling of the logs and a dozen other items were looked after by our beloved women, and their equal you would have difficulty to find anywhere.

Now we have a building worth no less than $10,000.00 and all of the finances have been cared

for but a small amount of $200.00 At least one-half of this Valley can look with pride at our structure and say, "that is my church. I helped build it with my own hands."

Conclusion

At present the work of our congregation is going along in a very encouraging manner. We have suffered reverses, loss of community center folk, scarcity of finance, had difficult transportation problems to solve, and just passed through a mighty severe Winter. Still our numbers continue, our interest increases, and we are in the act of planning for our new and permanent manse which is to be erected just back of our beautiful church. We have also to make our work more permanent, been enrolled in the Yukon Presbytery and been incorporated as a local organization under the laws of the Territory of Alaska. The colony itself is now under the leadership of Leo B. Jacobs, General Manager.

In the past we have overcome crisis after crisis. We are faced with a severe one at present. We wish to add, however, that with such a large venture, in spite of all the handicaps mentioned and the personalities involved, the acts of accomplishment have been tremendous. Both local and Federal Government needs to be given a multitude of thanks for their contributions to both local people and to the Territory in general. We hope and pray that as citizens we will be in some measure, at least, worthy of all that has been done for us. And whatever future action the National Government may take relative to its work and presence here, let it be assured, that their contributions here will not have been in

vain. The Matanuska Valley is here, the climate will remain the same, market and soil will improve with development. This 1935 movement will go down in history as one of the large 20th century pioneering projects.

Thank you, one and all, for your kind patience in reading this lengthy account of the set-up and of our work here,

I remain,
Yours in the Master's Work,
REVEREND B. J. BINGLE, *Pastor.*

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The History of the United Protestant Church

When it became certain that the Federal Government was going to plant a Colony in the Matanuska Valley in Alaska, the Home Missions Council assigned the religious care of the colonists to the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. The Presbyterian Church sent The Rev. Bert J. Bingle of Cordova to Palmer to organize a Protestant church work.

Mr. Bingle arrived at Palmer May 6, 1935 ahead of the colonists. A few survey men were here plus some homesteaders. A few days later the construction division arrived to construct tents for the families soon to arrive from Minnesota. By the next Sunday, May 12th, Mother's Day, the colonists had arrived and the first tent church service was held with thirty five persons present. The sermon topic was "Our Mothers", an appropriate theme since many present had so recently left mothers and homes so far away. That evening an informal get-acquainted service was held and the tent creaked under the strain of the crowd. These services and the campfire services will never be forgotten.

The pastor was the spiritual leader, fisherman, carpenter and editor of the news sheet. Under the direction of the pastor, work was immediately started on a Community hall where civic and religious groups could meet regularly. Odds and ends of lumber were collected and fitted into the first building used for worship at Palmer. However, religious services were held in the new hall only a short time when sickness entered the valley and several children died. A doctor arrived the next day after the outbreak of sickness and the Community hall became the Colony's hospital.

Services were held thereafter in the homes of the people and finally in a separate tent. It was here that plans were made to formally organize a church and in August, 1935, $500 was loaned by the Presbyterian Board to build a manse. The manse was ready for occupancy by November 1st, and the pastor's family, the church and the library moved in. Soon the manse was overcrowded and the need for a church building was pressing. On November 24th a church council was established, a constitution drafted, and the church named. By Easter of 1936 services were moved to the gymnasium for the manse could not hold the congregation which at times numbered over eighty.

In the summer of 1936 Mr. Bingle visited the National Missions Board in New York carrying an appeal for funds to build a church in Palmer. $1500 was loaned to start the work. The church council secured grounds from the Colony authorities for the erection of a permanent church and manse.

A construction foreman was engaged to superintend the many volunteer laborers who gave freely of their time to rear this church. The building is 32 feet wide and 84 feet long and has two wings each 15 feet wide and 30 feet long on the rear of the main building. The goal was to be in the new church by Christmas but the Alaskan winter tightened up. While the men worked at fever pitch in 10, 15, and 25 below zero weather day after day the women served them coffee and hot meals. All through the winter and into the spring of 1937 the work continued. Groups helped to build the log walls, raise the 32 foot log trusses frozen like giant icicles weighing hundreds of pounds, 18 men came together to put the roof on in cold rain. Men and women worked like Trojans. After the roof was on, the women came day after day until they had caulked all the cracks between the logs and applied linseed oil on the logs so that the first service could be held on Easter Sunday.

When the day came for the dedication of the church, protestant men and women in the valley looked with pride at this unique and substantial building and thought, "That is my church home, I helped build it".

On April 11, 1937 "the church of a thousand trees" was dedicated and the Rev. Bert J. Bingle was installed as pastor by the Presbytery of Yukon of which the church had become a member just the day before.

There has been much sacrifice and love in the building of this church by the pioneers. With a steadfast faith in God and the desire to pioneer with Christ, the congregation met in the open air on this site in the summer of 1936 to dedicate this place and said: "It is now that we come to formally dedicate these grounds to the God who has led us so far in this adventure... We stand here at this time with bared heads asking that the Christ be our leader, our guide, our stay, our Saviour. Amen".

United Protestant Church

palmer, alaska

BERTRAM H. RUTAN, MINISTER